



# PLIGHT FROM CORRUPTION TO MORALITY: ARUN JOSHI'S THE APPRENTICE

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## ABSTRACT

Arun Joshi, prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award winner novelist for his *The Last Labyrinth* is a distinct name in the field of Indian English fiction. He holds a place of singular merit in Indian writing in English dealing with the relevant themes of modern period. He has given a new direction to Indian literary scene mainly concerning his writing with the moral and spiritual problems of contemporary man and defines the nature of man and his confrontation with society while he is constantly drifting between right and wrong choices of living. Arun Joshi has given a new shape and treatment to modern man's vision turning his existentialist quest and identity crisis to a positive direction. He has aroused a genuine faith in the integrity of human values, relations and culture and tried to mould the individual towards a fruitful and hopeful life.

He has to his credit five novels – *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974), *The last Labyrinth* (1981) and *The City and the River* (1990) along with a collection of short stories entitled *The Survivor*. Joshi has renounced the larger world in favour of the inner nature of man and has engaged himself in a search for the essence of human living. *The Apprentice* narrates the story of an honest young individual Ratan Rathore, who, out of the problem of joblessness and corrupt ways of society is forced to adopt the corrupt practices and becomes apprentice of corruption but after the awakening of his soul involves self to be of good use to people and society through redemption.

**KEYWORDS:** Arun Joshi, *The Apprentice*, Human Values, Inner Nature, Essence, Decaying Values, Growth, Awakening, Redemption.

## INTRODUCTION

*The Apprentice*, the third novel of Joshi, is a telling commentary on the decaying values of a degenerating civilization. It is the story of a young man Ratan Rathore, who, out of sheer exhaustion of joblessness and privation is forced to shed the honesty and the old-world morality of his father to become an "apprentice" to the corrupt civilization. Ratan, the protagonist-narrator is initially an idealist like his father but he later admits to sacrifice his idealism for the sake of befitting self in the so-called modern society. Ratan Rathore, after his initial hesitation, yields completely to the corruption of modern society and thrives on it.

Ratan is the child of a double inheritance, the patriotic and courageous world of his father and the materialistic and worldly wisdom of his mother, who tells him : It was not patriotism but money.... that brought respect and brought security. Money made friends. Money succeeded where all else failed, There were many laws; but money was laws unto itself" (*The Apprentice* –20) He starts life with high ambitions and ideals, to be honest and true to his self but soon finds himself a misfit in the modern world. He then yields completely to the corruption of modern society, sheds the honesty and the old world morality of his father and becomes an "apprentice" to the corrupt world. He learns that one is alienated in this world unless one accepts and adjusts to the demands of the modern society in order to belong. He, thus, abdicates his true self to fit in the corrupt

society and in the process, he is alienated from his true self.

Modern man may either try and adjust to the "others," "to society, to the system, abdicating his true self or he may strive to keep and develop his individuality and thus alienate himself from society." (Fuerlicht, P-41) Both these types of alienation can be found in Ratan Rathore. He begins his life with high ambitions and ideals like his father to make a mark in the world with his good deeds. But he finds himself a misfit in the modern world. He had to abdicate his true self to fit in the corrupt society and eke out a living. In the process, he gets alienated from his true self and suffers a conflict of his conscience. In this feverish pursuit of career, Ratan submits himself to all sorts of corruption that the modern world offers. His corrupt deal at the end costs the life of the Brigadier, his closest friend, Ratan feels a vicarious responsibility for the Brigadier's death. His sense of individuality comes into conflict with his life of hypocrisy. With deep remorse, he realizes the futility of his life and decides to be of some use to others. He takes the menial work of a shoe shiner on the stairway of a Delhi Temple to purge his impure heart. At the same time, a rich limousine awaits him to take him to his office. Living in this modern world and yet untouched by its impurities Ratan seeks fulfillment in serving others in the humblest form as in the symbolic act of shoe-shining.

Ratan's conscience is torn between two different directions. He has always a conflict to follow his honest principles of father or

to choose the practical behavioral lessons given by his mother. It comes to his path when he is in way to establish himself as a separate entity following his career goals. The compelling force of civilized society shatters the idealism of the young individuals like Ratan and compels them to adopt the practical ways to be fitted in so-called modern society. According to Srinath, *The Apprentice* "is the tale of conscience-torn man with a curious mixture of idealism and docility, a vague sense of values, a helpless self-deceptive effort to flout them for the sake of a career- in short, with a deep awareness of the conflict between life and living" [ Srinath, P-127. ]

The novel presents conflicting career situations of the younger generation which is caused by the society. In the case of Ratan, who can be any young man, moving with his ideals and views, the social circumstances and the futility of social relations are the factors which cause him to shatter his personality and create confusion of values. It fails to help him retrieve his lost integrity of the self. *The Apprentice* holds a disquieting mirror up to modern society and morality.

Ratan Rathore starts his life as every young man who is full of ideals and illusions does. Ratan recollects his father's reverence for Gandhiji whom he called a man of suffering and under whose inspiration he gave up his lucrative legal practice to join the freedom struggle. He many times recollects the impressions of his father who always wanted and taught him to be respected and to be of use to others. Following his father's ideals, Ratan wanted to join Subhash Bose's army. He believed that he is ready to sacrifice all without promise of reward or success. Ratan identifies himself with the people suffering for the cause of the motherland : Every now and then someone I knew was imprisoned, maimed or killed and for days afterwards I felt burdened as though in some way I had been responsible for the killing." (*The Apprentice*, 21). However, he soon discovers that the honour of being the son of a freedom-fighter is of no practical value whatsoever in the world. His father, dying a martyr to the cause of the country's freedom left behind an ailing, starving and cynical wife and a patriotic and penniless son. The people, for whom, his father has squandered a lifetime, forgot him within a year. Ratan moves out of his village and goes in search of a job in the metropolis of Delhi. He leaves his home hoping to be worthy of his father and his ideals.

As long as Ratan remembers his father, he retained his moral core which gradually got tainted in the competitive urban environment. Embittered with an uncertain future, without any influential connections, Ratan undergoes a humiliating experience as he is rejected and jeered at while hunting for a job. All his education and intelligence do not help him. Then he learns to keep up appearances by discarding even ordinary decency and friendship. He completely alienates himself from his true self and ideals in the process of his metamorphosis from honest individual to corrupt Ratan Rathore. He describes his own aberrations with a sense of self awareness and objectivity :

I had become at the age of twenty one a hypocrite and a liar; in short, a sham . I had been insecure before and full of strange fears. But I had never undertook such sustained,

if harmless, deception, for once I had lied about having a job I had lie about numerous other things... I had become a master faker: (*The Apprentice*-28)

Ratan narrowly escapes the starvation death through the generosity of his equally miserable roommates in an inn. A chance introduction by one of them secures him a job of temporary clerk in the department of war purchases. From that day, the "practical" Ratan never looks back. He even surprises himself by ignoring those who saved him from death. Ratan becomes obsessed with wealth, influence and security and stops at nothing: "I was a different cut; educated, intelligent, cultured and it was my right that I should rise in life to levels higher than the others aspired for." (*The Apprentice*-32)

Although Ratan is well settled in life, he cannot feel a sense of satisfaction because he sacrifices all the principles that have guided him for the sake of his career. In spite of all the material comforts, discontentment becomes a way of life for Ratan. He finds himself deeply lost in the corrupt atmosphere. For the sake of confirmation and promotion, he is forced to marry a girl related to the Superintendent, though he is not particularly interested. It does not take much time for him to realize that the world runs on deals. His own marriage is a deal for his career:

If men forgot how to make deals the world would come to a stop. It would lose its propelling power. Men would not know what to do with themselves. They would lose interest, It is not the atom or the Sun or God or Sex that lies at the heart of the Universe: it is deals, DEALS.... They are simply there, like air. (*The Apprentice*-51)

In the process of these strange bargains with the world ,Ratan becomes a hypocrite. His hypocrisy fetches him a car, a bungalow and a good place in society at the cost of his peace of mind. Thus, his conscience degenerates totally and he suffers with a "crisis of character." He becomes an endless seeker of materialistic objects in the pursuit of his career and ends up by accepting a bribe when he least needs money. At every stage , he puts up an initial resistance only to discover the futility of his efforts. The more money he accumulates, the more dissatisfied he becomes.

Ratan leads a frustrated and exhausted family life. He is restless everywhere, at workplace, at home and at all the other places where he moves, torn between two sides of his personalities, the innate hidden instincts of his father and the outer demands of society which firstly he accepts unwillingly but later becomes apprentice to it. A strange fear haunts him all the time. When the Brigadier was on the brink of madness in a military hospital, due to the shock caused to him when he is declared responsible for the act of corruption for buying substandard military weapons, Ratan felt himself guilty as he knew that the Brigadier was not at all responsible for that. His conscience haunts him to reconcile and to express the right matter to the officials. He is mentally resolved to save his friend. Ratan writes his confession but modifies it instantly and tries to justify his act by convincing himself of his "innocence" and finally pockets the confession letter for ever. He is surprised to find

out that the higher officials of his Department and the Minister concerned were the agents behind the act of bribery for which his friend Brigadier is declared guilty and he, himself, was simply an instrument in the hands of these so called higher authorities. However, the Brigadier could not wait for Ratan's confession and killed himself.

At this point, Ratan realizes that there is no end to human vanity. The dead Brigadier's vision trailed him wherever he went. He is filled with an endless torment of fear and realizes the gravity of his sin. At last his alert consciousness alienates him from the degenerated society:

Twenty years and nothing gained. An empty lifetime. What had I learned? Pushing files ? Maneuvering ? At forty five all that I knew was to maneuver. A trickster, that was what I had led life make of me. Did I know the meaning of honour, friendship ? Did I ever know it ? would I ever know it again ? (*The Apprentice* -139)

Ratan realizes that his life has been a great waste. He is not sure what precisely corrupted the atmosphere of the society. But he is full of doubts about the way to rid the society of this pestilence. He finally realizes that one cannot live for oneself because no human act is performed in isolation and without consequence. Hence, out of an acute sense of guilt and a quest to understand the meaning of life, he undergoes the humble apprenticeship in the world. He feels that the only sustaining basis for action is to be of use to others. He has lost his self and feels the anguish of loss. His decision to recover the lost self, reveals the need to realize one's integrity.

The novel deals with the growth of his guilt and self realization based on his conscience. His act of corruption leads to the death of his closest friend, the Brigadier. As a result, his sense of individuality comes into conflict with his life of hypocrisy. He tries to redeem himself by indulging in shoe shining on the stairway of a temple. He realizes the futility of his life and decides to be of some use to other and seeks fulfillment in serving others in the humblest form. Ratan's conscience makes him understand that a combination of humanism and religion can save man steeped in corruption.

*The Apprentice* is a creative comment on the crisis of character and a conflict of conscience in a crowd of unaccepted social circumstances and people which compel a man to accept the forged picture of self. Rattan Rathore is a product and a victim of the decadent social values. Moving between the dichotomy in his 'double inheritance' and regretful of having misguided to pursue the false philosophy of 'becoming one with the society around in its own terms' Ratan is on a move to rebuild the edifice of the remaining years of his life. The novel traces four distinct phases in Ratan's life: the phase of youth and idealism, phase of adulthood and coming up in life the hard way, the phase of disillusionment and guilt, and finally the phase of repentance and guilt. Ratan's move to serve people and humanity undertaking the work of shoe shining to clear his soul is the outcome of his awakening of conscience.

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